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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a means to develop and implement a services delivery system for secondary level learning disabled students, which is based on surveys of secondary school teachers and administrators. The service delivery system proposed is one which can be adapted or modified to a wide variety of teaching situations. Theoretical and research bases for the program are discussed. (Author/SBH)

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ABSTRACT

The Challenge of Servicing Adolescents with Learning Problems

The need for improved educational services for secondary students with high incidence handicaps is urgent. In order to implement new legislation in the United States and to provide the best possible services for all adolescents, it is necessary to develop an efficient delivery model. Services must be provided in a practical and appropriate manner through a system with a basis in research. with this age population rather than with younger children.

Means to develop and implement a services delivery system, based on surveys of secondary school teachers and administrators, are described in the paper. The services delivery system proposted is one which can be adapted or modified to a wide variety of teaching situations. Theoretical and research bases for the program will also be discussed.

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The Challenge of Servicing Adolescents with Learning Problems

by Suzanne T. Major Ph. D.

A major problem for handicapped adolescents is the lack of special services available in the secondary schools. This is a multifaceted problem which cannot be solved simply by pouring more teachers into the secondary system or instituting new programs. There are prerequisite problems of teacher/administrator attitudes toward special education, lack of information and poor communications. There are the more practical problems related to lack of appropriate materials, lack of good university programs, lack of qualified special education teachers and lack of proven program models.

Recently a survey was conducted in a large metropolitan area within the Midwest United States. Regular and special education teachers and administrators at the secondary level were asked to respond regarding attitudes toward and identified needs within secondary special education.

Of 1051 respondents, 792 (75%) were regular secondary teachers teaching in the content areas (science, history, etc.), 148 (14%) were special services personnel (special education teachers, counselors, psychologists, etc.) and 111 (11%) were school administrators (principals and superintendents). The major problems identified by this survey related to poor

communications and public relations.

Regular content area teachers indicated that they are unfamiliar with characteristics of or methods for teaching special education students. 98% of those responding had not had a single course in special education. Further, these regular teachers indicated that they lacked the confidence needed to deal with exceptional students (84% of respondents) and that these students should be taught solely by special educators (89% of respondents).

Responses from administrators were similar in several respects. Of the administrators surveyed, 99% had no courses in special education. These results indicate, first of all, that regular teachers and secondary school administrators are uninformed about special education. Further, the regular content area teachers feel unable and even fearful of dealing directly with exceptional adolescents. A primary objective, therefore, in the provision of special services to secondary students, is to educate regular teachers and administrators about the characteristics and needs of exceptional adolescents.

There was a significant difference as to perception of available services between the regular teachers and the administrators. 96% of the regular teachers responded that their schools were not providing sufficient services for

exceptional students, compared to only 43% of the administrators. This difference indicates a lack of communication which was also revealed by other aspects of the survey. Both regular and special education teachers responded that communications between regular and special education teachers were, overall, poor (90% of the regular teachers, 72% of the special education teachers). Further, these two groups were in agreement on their perceptions of administration. Both groups responded that administrators in their specific settings were not supportive of special education (84% of the regular teachers, 88% of the special education teachers) and that the administrators were not well informed about special education (92% of the regular teachers, 96% of the special education teachers). A second major objective, therefore, must be to open communications related to services available and need for exceptional students.

The problems of lack of knowledge and poor communication are not insurmountable. In fact, there are some very obvious and inexpensive solutions which depend upon more efficient use of special education teachers. Secondary schools have a valuable resource in the special education teachers already employed. These personnel should be scheduled appropriately so that they can provide inservice training for other faculty and

administrators and so they can provide regular teachers with consultation on individual students. It is much better to provide good services for a few students than to provide mediocre services for many. Once the regular education teachers and the administrators better understand characteristics and needs of exceptional students, as well as the workings of the special services within the building, the system of services provision will work more efficiently. Informing the consumer will certainly improve communications as well.

In those settings where there are no special education teachers, outside resources (colleges, clinics, etc.) must be utilized for this inservice training (or, of course, can be used to supplement onsite faculty). As Federal money is available to assist in inservice training, there should not be difficulty in locating appropriate outside resources for training. It is essential, however, that the trainer be familiar with the setting and provide "brass tacks" not "blue sky" assistance.

Another approach to improving knowledge of special education and related communication is simple public relations. Too often the special education teacher has a room aside from the beaten path, has a different schedule and does not have regular school responsibilities (lunchroom, etc.). Regular teachers see the special education teacher as one with a

reduced class size, fewer responsibilities, a larger budget, an easier job. The special education teacher needs to make a strenuous effort to appear in the faculty lounge and cafeteria, to bring along papers to correct and schedules and reports to complete and to communicate with regular teachers about load, about specific students and to respond to problems and needs of the regular teachers. This is a simple, informal but vital (and currently missing) solution to some of the problems of information and communication between regular and special educators at all levels.

There are other important but practical aspects of providing services to handicapped adolescents. One is that of obtaining appropriate materials. For a long time, there were not good materials available for teaching the handicapped adolescent. Currently, however, this situation is greatly improved as publishers are rushing to fill the gap. There are still some deficiencies in the high interest/low reading level materials available. Some of these materials are an immature format with large print or an over-dependence on pictures. Most materials still use the traditional format of reading which, of course, presents serious problems for learning disabled students. Therefore, in spite of increased availability of materials, these still must be evaluated carefully. There is

a hugh gap between the need for specialized materials and knowledge of what is available.

A study by Reese and Schmidt (1976) indicates that students spend the majority of their learning time with materials (75% in class time, 90% of homework time). In contrast, however, those authors found that schools spend less than 3% of the budget on materials and teachers spend less than 1% of their time to select materials. This study demonstrates the serious disparity between the use and selection of materials.

There are comprehensive schema available for the evaluation and selection of materials. For example, NCEMMH has made available a seven page format which could be extremely useful if teachers had enough time. A simplified approach would include at least a cursory review of materials, using the following checklist of materials characteristics.

I. Appropriateness

A. Does the material have face validity? Does it appear to teach what it claims to teach?

B. Are there specific objectives for the student?

C. Is the difficulty level appropriate? (Often actual readability level is higher than that described.)

II. Motivational effectiveness

A. Is the material stimulating to you - the teacher?

(Remember, teacher expectancy studies indicate teachers are most effective with materials they like)

B. Does it appear to have student appeal? (Students will not learn efficiently if they are not interested in the materials. Consider male/female, urban/rural, age, appropriate interests.)

III. Quality

A. Are the materials: Durable? Sufficient in scope and detail? Well sequenced?

B. Is the necessary equipment included?

C. Is the teacher's manual useful, clear and complete?

IV. Implementation

A. Is special training needed?

B. How much time and effort is required of the teacher?

C. Can the materials be used for groups and for individuals?

D. What special equipment is needed?

V. Cost and Usage

A. What are the initial and ongoing costs?

B. With what frequency can material be used, and with how many students?

VI. Evaluation

A. Is there a built-in system for monitoring student

progress.

B. Is there research available which evaluates the material?

C. Is student feedback provided?

VII. Format

A. Does the material accommodate for short attention span?

B. Is the approach innovative? (Traditional approaches have obviously failed the student with learning problems.)

C. Is a multisensory approach used to accommodate weaknesses in learning patterns?

D. Can the student become involved in the materials? (Programmed learning packets are not adequate.)

Once materials have been selected in a rational manner, evaluation of those materials is easy. Though a sophisticated, theoretically sound approach could be used (such as that by Stufflebeam et al, 1971) these models are generally very time consuming and possibly limited in application. Three useful techniques for evaluating materials include use of pre- and post-testing, careful observation of the student and structured discussion with the student. If questioned carefully, students will provide useful information on how efficient, interesting,

motivating and educational the materials actually are. The student is the most valuable resource for evaluation of materials and a resource which is often ignored.

An optimistic view must be taken. Hopefully, P L 94-142 and the requirement to prove every student a free and appropriate public education will result in improved services in the secondary schools. Since there now exists a surplus of regular class teachers (in light of fewer job openings, declining population, etc.) teacher training institutions should place increased emphasis on the training of combined special education - content area specialists for secondary schools. Third, as parents become increasingly well informed, more pressure will be placed on schools to comply with the law. Thus it is the outside forces of P L 94-142, teacher training institutions and parents which must play a primary role in proving improved services for the learning disabled adolescent.

The problems of providing optimal services for mildly handicapped students are immense in that very little is being done now. Too often, however, in education, experts rush in with fancy theoretical models, and expensive solutions. The suggestions here are simple and inexpensive to implement, but extremely important if services are going to improve. Increased knowledge and communications, better use of the

special educator's time, improved public relations, careful choice of materials, extended responsibility by universities and parents, will bring about much needed change without incredible disruption.

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